

Synesthesia and Colour Atmospheres

For this course, the aim is to understand how to induce sensations in the spectator via colours in order to support the narrative or reinforce a point.

To do this, there will first be an introduction to synaesthesia, followed by film analyses. Finally, the students will put their projects into practice by integrating the use of colour into the diegesis.

Secondly, the creation of a moodboard using tools such as film-grab.org and flim.ai.

Translated with DeepL.com (free version)

Let's start with a Disclaimer: I'm going to talk about colour concepts. As we saw in the History of Colour course, there is no one truth about colour and concepts evolve all the time depending on society and culture.

Draw an arrow on the board. Beyond the arrow, indicate 'TRUTH' and explain that it cannot be reached. When we talk about colour, a truth is only valid in the field of study we are talking about. And when we talk about artistic concepts, this truth is always malleable. An artist can develop a colour scheme that will be true for his own work, but not for that of others. When we talk about colour in art, we're always talking about conveying sensations to our audience, never about truth.

Filmmakers often use a specific colour scheme as the starting point for a film that can evolve and whose meaning can vary according to the implicit sensation they want to share.

SYNESTHESIA

Synaesthesia is the tendency of a person to confuse two different sensations, or to experience a mixture of sensations when faced with a single stimulus.

Etymology: from the ancient greek *sun* (or *syn*) συν (=simultaneous) and *aisthesis* αἴσθησις (= perception)

It could be a disabling condition that causes pain due to an apparently non-aggressive stimulus. Or seeing a character always in the same colour. It is a neuronal disorder that activates several regions of the brain in response to a single stimulus.

NOT ONLY

It can also be a way in which a person associates one perception with several sensations, depending on their experience, culture or social interactions.

Before taking an intellectual approach to synaesthesia, I'd like to present it in

a more emotional way. Because what we want to share to the audience are sensations to get them to feel something. And to do that, I'd like to share with you a feeling I have with a piece of music.

DEBUSSY

This is a music from the Impressionist movement composed by Debussy: *Dr Gradus Ad Parnassum*. This music, with its continuous melodic flow, reminds me of spring rain. These very heavy rains that come in May and whose drops create variations in the way they fall. And thinking about that rain also brings to mind the very damp smell of vegetation as it grows.

LISTEN TO THE MUSIC, taking care to give the preceding indications to help the pupils to project themselves.

To go further, suggest listening to symphonic poems from the early twentieth century which, on the same principle, associate instruments with ideas in a more literal way.

The instruments may correspond to characters, such as the solo violin in Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre*, or the pipe representing the bird in Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* or Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. In Smetana's *Moldau*, the atmosphere is more general, describing a river that

expands and finally flows into the ocean.

CHROMESTESIA

When it comes to synaesthesia associated with colours, we talk about **chromaesthesia**. A **minor scale** might suggest a **cool colour**, whereas a **major scale** might evoke a **warm colour**.

And we can refer to Goethe's **Colour Theory**, in which he associates colours with states of mind.

BLUE

For Michel Pastoureau, blue is a wise, soothing colour.

For Goethe, it means calm and tranquillity. But also a touch of sadness and nostalgia.

RED

For Pastoureau: it's fire and blood. It's love and hell.

Goethe: It gives an impression of gravity and dignity, and evokes energy and passion.

GREEN

Pastoureau: The colour that hides its game because it is unstable.

Goethe: Has a calming and harmonious effect. It embodies purity because it is the perfect balance

between blue and yellow. Green is perceived as stable and pleasant.

YELLOW

Pastoureau: attributes of infamy and deceit.

Goethe: Yellow is associated with warmth and cheerfulness. Also a feeling of happiness and comfort.

WHITE

Pastoureau: Everywhere it's purity and innocence.

Goethe: White embodies neutrality and serenity. Purity and clarity. But it's also a symbol of unity and represents a beginning.

BLACK

Pastoureau: Mourning and elegance

Goethe: negation and darkness, absence and the end.

HALF COLOURS

Pastoureau: of no importance (3rd rank colours)

Goethe: rather represent the earth, the palpable. Unlike the other purer colours which represent the spiritual.

Patti Bellantoni also wrote 'If it's Purple, someone's gonna die', but it's more of a treasure hunt to find occurrences between different films,

not a historical or socio-cultural study.

REMINDER YANNICK MOUREN

During the course on the transition from black and white to colour in cinema, we saw 'oppose' and 'rarefy'. Now we're going to see 'systematise' and 'intensify'.

DELEUZE

Gilles Deleuze is a French philosopher best known in the film world for his books 'Movement-Image' and 'Time-Image', in which he describes the immanence of the image in movement versus the transcendence of the cut in editing.

But he also worked on the aesthetics of art and contributed two important concepts:

- Percept
- Haptic vision

PERCEPT

This is what we perceive or feel without even the presence of a stimulus.

On the contrary, perception is the direct reaction to a stimulus.

Percept is therefore what the artist tries to instil in the viewer through the medium at his disposal.

Deleuze talks about haptic vision, among other things.

HAPTIC VISION

This concept refers to 'vision that touches'. The idea is that by using processes specific to his medium, the artist will make the images physically felt.

Obviously, we can think of the vertigo effect! But colour can also play a role.

For example, if you've already seen an Edward Hopper exhibition, or if you have the opportunity to do so, try looking at the paintings from different distances. If you're close, you'll see a rough texture, raised brushstrokes. But if you stand further away, it looks like velvet. If you're close up, you'll see a predominance of line, but if you're further away, you'll see a predominance of touch.

TEMPERATURE OF COLOUR

In the course on the history of colour, we saw how Charles Alphonse Du Fresnoy, Joshua Reynolds and Gérard de Lairese gradually came to associate colours from yellow to red

with heat and colours from blue to green with cold.

But this was not immediately the case. First of all, the warm colours were those that came out of the image, which had 'relief'. Unlike the cold colours, which were used for backgrounds and dark areas.

The colours were used to convey the spatial nature of the image.

Show the painting *Impression de Soleil Levant* by Monet and demonstrate the cultural influence since, if you reverse the colours, the sun becomes blue against an orange sky, it is the blue that stands out.

EMPHASISE THE CULTURAL INFLUENCE AND TAKE A CAUTIOUS APPROACH TO KANDINSKY'S DISCOURSE

PLACE HIM IN HIS TIME:

It was a time when everyone had blind faith in physics and the public had a little difficulty understanding the wave theories of the electromagnetic spectrum. There is clearly confusion between mechanical waves and electromagnetic waves, which are completely different phenomena. Explain the difference between hearing two notes simultaneously and superimposing two colours.

THE EMOTIONAL VIBRATION OF COLOUR

Go back over the reference to Spiritualism in Art in the lesson on the history of colour. Kandinsky made the connection between shapes and colour temperatures. He develops the link between colours and music, not by the link with the Pythagorean scale but by joining the bodily sensation of a sound with that provoked by a colour. A colour could provoke an inner vibration similar to that of a note, depending on its timbre, frequency, attack and duration.

Kandinsky believed that colour could function in a similar way to music. As an abstract art form, music provokes an emotional vibration without the need for concrete representation.

So

Warm colours, such as red or yellow, are comparable to the high, vibrating notes of a brass instrument.

Cool colours, such as blue or green, are associated with the lower, softer notes of a cello or double bass.

Kandinsky also associated colours with emotional states:

Kandinsky saw **blue** as a calm, spiritual colour, with a depth that evokes infinity. The darker the blue, the more it is associated with states of serenity and meditation. In contrast, a

light blue can evoke lighter emotions, such as calm and lightness.

Yellow, on the other hand, is an expansive and dynamic colour, which he sees as 'aggressive' and 'close to the earth'. In his opinion, yellow is associated with sensations of warmth and energy; it can convey a certain excitement, even a form of unpleasantness if the intensity becomes too strong.

Red is a colour that, according to Kandinsky, symbolises strength, passion and vitality. He associated red with intense, even violent feelings, because it is a colour that seems to come close to the observer and embodies explosive energy.

(Make the link with colour temperatures and cultural influence)

What Kandinsky develops should not be taken literally, but it can give us clues as to how the public interacted with pictorial art.

For example, he goes one step further with the use of colour:

Contrasting warm and cool colours: Contrasting warm and cool colours creates visual tension. For example, blue and yellow placed together can evoke a tension between depth and energy, creating a powerful emotional dynamic.

Complementarity: He believes that complementary colours (such as red and green) can reinforce each other, producing a unique visual and emotional harmony that draws the eye while producing a calming effect.

The effect of lightness: the lighter a colour, the more it has an emotional 'lightness'; darker colours, on the other hand, are perceived as heavier and more serious.

Pastel colours, for example, easily evoke childhood.

FINAL POINT ON MUSIC: SUPPORTING THE NARRATIVE

For a composer, there are basically two ways of developing music: harmony and counterpoint.

Harmony is the use of successive chords to accompany a melody, while counterpoint is the use of another melody to accompany a melody. Example: a canon.

(Canon in D.M by Pachelbel for explanation?)

From a narrative and/or discursive point of view, it's possible to do the same thing with colours. You can create harmonies within an image with the sets, clothes, props and lighting, and develop them over the course of the narrative to tell a second story or support the main story.

Colours can be used to create a cinematic poetic that offers an aesthetic effect and also becomes a narrative structure in its own right.

CINEMA

Start with the opening of Godard's *Le Mépris*, with the sequence shot that changes colour and evokes the development of the relationship between Camille and Paul in the film.

EXTRAIT : *Le Mépris* de Jean-Luc Godard (1963)

Another reason given is that during this period, Godard enjoyed using the three 'primary' colours of red, yellow and blue. And Godard was an experimenter, he would simply have made an aesthetic proposal for this film, the subject of which is cinema.

He always displayed a colour wheel on the blackboard to show his artistic choices.

THE CHARACTERS

HER

In *Her*, Spike Jonze mainly uses brown for his overall atmosphere. He associates the atmosphere with his

main character and his social interactions. There are three types: human interaction, interaction with the machine, and introspection.

Brown will be a starting point. When Theodore interacts with humans, the colours tend towards yellow, whereas when he interacts with the computer, the mood is more red. In fact, the two shirts worn by Theodore are either red or yellow. These events are punctuated by introspections in which Theodore is bathed in blue.

EXTRAITS : Her de Spike Jonze (2013)

THE LAST EMPEROR

Here, colour reflects the protagonist's state of mind. In this film, which follows the life of an emperor, the more he discovers about the world around him, the more the colour palette shifts. Tradition is represented by red. But the further he advances in life, the more the colours change tonality: red, then orange, then yellow, and when he takes the measure of the whole, he is surrounded by green. It's a metaphor for the evolution of the character's state of mind, but each colour doesn't carry its own symbolism. It is the change in hue that is significant.

These colours, on a wheel are on a progressive shift.

EXTRAITS : The Last Emperor de Bernardo Bertolucci (1987)

DOMUS

In this mini-series, the choice was made to highlight the blue for the bliss of the group of friends, but to keep the yellow in the highlights to preserve a certain contrast in hue.

The characters are being attacked by an invisible entity. To show its presence, the blue has been turned green to get closer to the yellow of the highlights and symbolise the oppression represented by its presence. Even if the audience doesn't notice it, they implicitly recognise its presence.

EXTRAITS : Domus de Hervé Brami (2023)

BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOUR

In this film, blue is Emma's colour. She expresses herself through this colour (the colour of her hair). However, the protagonist is Adèle, who is in love with Emma.

Each sequence contains blue and can symbolise Adele's love for Emma. During the most virtuous period of their love, the blue is particularly vibrant, as if to show the intensity of her love.

Later, when the love fades, the blue is still present in the film, around Adèle. But in a paler, more faded colour. But the presence of blue seems to mean that she's still thinking about it.

And at the end, when she tries to ignore her romance, there is still this image of a blue dress in a predominantly grey environment.

EXTRAITS : La Vie d'Adèle d'Abdellatif Kechiche (2013)

JOKER

Arthur Fleck is a character who suffers from a disorder that causes him to laugh at any emotion he feels. This disorder will cause him to develop psychic problems, turning him into the Joker.

To show these two aspects of the character, Arthur Fleck is surrounded by a cold, dark atmosphere, whereas when he is the Joker, a luminous pastel yellow bathes his environment, as if to signify a liberation, a letting go.

EXTRAITS : Joker de Todd Philipps (2019)

LA LA LAND

There's a lot to be said about the colours in this film, because there's an opposition between fantasy, which pays homage to the musicals of yesteryear, and disillusionment, with more washed-out colours, reminiscent of the opposition between reality and dreams in the transition from monochrome to polychrome in

cinema. I'm just going to focus on the character of Mia to explain the colour work, because there's a lot of costume work in this film.

The film is cut to the rhythm of the 4 seasons and the colours reflect an evolution in the treatment of the character.

Winter and spring

The costumes are a solid, very intense colour. The plain colour can signify the simplicity of Mia's preoccupations: her aim is to follow her passions and become an actress.

Mia's first colour in winter is blue, which can signify calmness and even carefreeness.

Before moving on to the next season, we see footage of Mia's casting in which she wears none of the colours we see in the rest of the film, as if she has to compromise and is contaminated by other colours.

Then spring arrives and Mia wears a yellow dress, a colour close to the representation of spring when the sun returns. This colour can signify a departure or even the blossoming of a new life for the character.

At the end of spring, Mia is now wearing a green dress. But unlike the yellow she was wearing before, this green is dark and blends in better with the surroundings. This colour seems to herald the separation that will take

place later in the film, as it opens and end to the relationship between Mia and Sebastian.

Then comes summer. It's still a very colourful, warm environment, but something seems to mark a change. Mia wears either much more faded clothes or multicoloured outfits.

Is it because there's something wrong? Is it a way of expressing a life lived with someone else? Is it about rubbing off on the other person or losing yourself? To lose herself in her objectives, which were solely to be an actress.

Also, once summer arrives, Mia changes her outfits much more often. Is this to show that she has a fuller life or that she's losing herself?

Finally, in the autumn, one sequence in particular caught my attention: when she goes for a casting. There's a back shot with the two casting directors, the woman in yellow and the man in black. Yellow was the colour she was wearing when she met Sebastian, black is the colour Sebastian has been wearing since he 'mourned' his music by agreeing to play in a band whose compositions he doesn't like. This shot presents these colours as a choice.

EXTRAIT casting 97' : La la land de Damien Chazelle (2016)

THE RED SHOES

In this English film, it's the colour that changes the symbolism.

It's the story of a ballerina (Victoria) in a show adapted from Andersen's fairy tale of the same name.

These bright red shoes represent her passion for her art. Later, she gave up dancing for love. But the slippers, as if bewitched, end up crossing her path again and cause her death. Red, which was at first a frenzied passion, ends up being the symbol what is inert.

EXTRAIT : The Red Shoes de Michael Powell et Emeric Pressburger (1948)

INTENSE COLOURS - ANIMATION

UNICORN WARS

This feature-length animated film for adults may sound like a joke at first glance: it's the story of a world with an enchanted forest where everything lives in harmony with nature under the protection of unicorns. All was well until the day the cubs found a book that they appropriated. In this book, they understood that they were God's chosen ones, the chosen people to whom everything should return.

They believed themselves to be superior and the 'jealous' unicorns wanted to punish them. A war ensued and the cubs were driven from their paradise. This war continues in the

film and will not end until the last unicorn has been killed and her heart devoured by the last bear cub.

Against a backdrop of religious fanaticism, everything is done to unsettle the viewer's archetypes: majestic unicorns, colourful little cubs, arrows with heart-shaped tips. The muddy grounds of the training camps are pink. This contrasting aesthetic underlines the cruelty of war by disturbing the viewer's perceptions.

In this story, we follow two brothers: Blue Bear and Pink Bear, who live in a particularly colourful environment, full of life that is a paradox with the violence and cruelty shown.

EXTRAIT : Unicorn Wars de Alberto Vazquez (2022)

There are a lot of references to Apocalypse Now in terms of the use of drugs and the horror of war, and the general atmosphere evolves as the film progresses. And it's worth noting that the animation is particularly good at depicting the experiences of Alberto Vazquez.

EXTRAIT : Unicorn Wars de Alberto Vazquez (2022) - bad trip

In the same way, the treatment of the analyses, in a two-colour environment, makes it possible to

know the point of view of the memory we are looking at.

Show a war sequence that highlights the visual dichotomy and lead a discussion on how this rupture is set up.

EXTRAIT : Unicorn Wars de Alberto Vazquez (2022) - 3eme acte guerre

The director is careful not to give a symbolic explanation for the film, which is open to a plethora of interpretations. Some say it's a commentary on human nature, others that the film is an ecological message, and others that nature is a whole in which unicorns are the immune system struggling to stop the infection.

CONTRASTING ATMOSPHERES

In The King and the Bird, contrasting atmospheres are used to show two worlds: grey industrialisation and exploitation and colourful nature.

EXTRAITS : Le Roi et l'Oiseau de Paul Grimault (1980)

In La Planète Sauvage, we find the same idea. The Draags are blue to signify their advanced but emotionally sterile civilisation. In contrast, the colour of the Om allows the viewer to identify with them.

As the film progresses, we notice a change of palette to show a break with the established order. The Drags were mostly in cold environments.

EXTRAITS : La Planète Sauvage de René Laloux (1973)

Animation can indulge in many eccentricities to transport us into different worlds.

EXTRAITS : La Passion Van Gogh de Dakota Kobiela et Hugh Welchman (2017)

IL DESSERTO ROSSO

In intensifying the use of colour, we find Antonioni, who was a great supporter of colour, but in a country that put the brakes on its use. When he was still just a film buff writing in magazines, he wrote that 'black and white in cinema is what drawing is to painting'.

Il Deserto Rosso was his first polychrome film, in which he paid particular attention to the significance of colour.

In this film, and in the same way that Matisse (some historians speak of a homage to the painting of the same title) works on the relationship between the background and the figure so that the eye hesitates to look at one or the other. He operates a kind of tone on tone with the characters,

and the camera leaves them when they begin to stand out.

In one sequence, Giuliana is lying in bed. Her shirt merges with the sheets, her hair with the headboard. Then when she moves, the field gives way to a blue wall. She moves away from the white and into the blue.

EXTRAITS : Le Désert Rouge de Michelangelo Antonioni (1964) 15'

He makes extensive use of fog to blend his characters into their surroundings, like a hold. The colourful characters are lost in a background of greyness, passages that stand out from a convivial moment.

EXTRAITS : Le Désert Rouge de Michelangelo Antonioni (1964) 50' + un extérieur

Here, too, there is a question of industrialisation. As the film progresses, where nature loses colour, factories gain it, like a devitalisation. In one sequence, he dyes the grass black (probably using film that is less sensitive to this hue)

EXTRAITS : Le Désert Rouge de Michelangelo Antonioni (1964) 43'

There is also a chromatic rhyme in the film: yellow symbolises disease and contagion.

Right at the start of the film, a flame is shown in close-up, then it's the colour of a child's plastic toy, a boat, wicker baskets that seem to be mass-produced.

Then, to contrast with the industry, Antonioni gives us a very colourful sequence on the beach, far from the industries. This sequence is accompanied by a mystical chant to underline the beauty of nature.

EXTRAITS : Le Désert Rouge de Michelangelo Antonioni (1964) 88'

SHYAMALAN

Some directors also have their own colour scheme that they use in their films. This is the case with M. Night Shyamalan.

Red often surrounds what is evil. Green is also associated with what is bad. Purple, which often represents a mixture of good (blue) and evil (red), is an ambiguous colour. It often embodies mystery. Orange is also ambiguous. Blue and yellow are more positive colours.

For Old, Shyamalan had to realise that his viewers had realised. He used methods to confuse the issue.

For example, the girl at the beginning wears a jersey of all colours, then orange and blue. These mixtures

make it impossible for the viewer to guess where the film is going.

Moreover, the parasols and towels are yellow or orange, which could represent a form of protection, but they are on a beach of the same colour, which causes them to age prematurely.

Similarly, in the recent *Trap*, we see shots of the main character bathed in red. But the protagonist is the wrong person; Shyamalan associates red with the character's comfort zone, because he's the bad guy!

As far as synesthesia is concerned, Shyamalan is very good at making the viewer feel sensations through his choice of frames and camera movements. When it comes to drawing inspiration from the rich filmic grammar of a contemporary director, he is a very good example.

CONCLUSION

While other arts use what is called the 'arbitrary use' of colour (Fauvism, for example), cinema is lagging behind because, according to André Bazin, it is ontologically realistic. Independent cinema proposes some things, but as soon as it comes to mainstream cinema, it struggles to propose colours that distance themselves from the representation of nature. To avoid disorientating the viewer, colours

remain natural in cinema, with a few exceptions.

But even today, what allows a director to emancipate himself from these rules is phantasmagoria through musicals, animation, storytelling and many others.

END

Present tools for making a moodboard and tools for choosing palettes.

GRAB FILM

FLIM

ART AUTHORITY

COLOR ADOBE <https://color.adobe.com/>

A word about firefox and extended colour management